

Episcopal priest helps plan interfaith prayer house in Mongolia

by [Egan Millard](#) in the [March 9, 2022](#) issue



Susan Sims Smith during a trip to Mongolia in 2017. (Photo by Amy Carper)

It might seem far-fetched for an Episcopal priest from Little Rock, Arkansas, to be working on an interfaith prayer house in Mongolia, a mostly Buddhist country. But for Susan Sims Smith, it's just the latest stage of her longtime dedication to interfaith work.

"I'm deeply committed to Christ," she said. "And I also have a lot of blessings from Hindu and Buddhist spiritual traditions that are enriching [my] Christian practice."

The Mongolian prayer house is a collaboration with one of the exiled Tibetan government's top Buddhist advisers. And it draws on Sims Smith's experience creating the Arkansas House of Prayer—"an interfaith haven for silent prayer and meditation" in the woods outside Little Rock.

Sims Smith, who teaches meditation, first had the idea for the Arkansas House of Prayer when she saw a photo of the Episcopal House of Prayer—a chapel and retreat center open to all on the grounds of the Roman Catholic Saint John’s Abbey and University in central Minnesota. The building’s distinctive design, featuring a round contemplative prayer room constructed with wood, glass, and stone, caught Sims Smith’s eye.

“Teaching meditation is not easy,” she said. “I said to my husband, ‘If somebody could sit in a room like this, the architecture itself would really help them move into silence.’”

The Arkansas House of Prayer, a joint ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas and St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church in Little Rock, opened in 2007. The centerpiece of its design, which has won several architectural awards, is the round, wood-paneled prayer room that opens up toward the sky.

Sims Smith’s new project takes the concept of the interfaith prayer house to Mongolia, but she said the idea originated in Dharamshala, India. There, she met Kuten-la, the Tibetan government’s official state oracle, who advises the Dalai Lama on spiritual and political matters.

She showed him pictures of the Arkansas House of Prayer because she thought he would enjoy it. He immediately had his assistant bring in drawings of a round meditation center he had been inspired to build in Mongolia.

“I said, ‘If there’s anything I can do to help you when you get ready to work on that, I would be happy to do it,’” Sims Smith said. “And after I said it, I was thinking, ‘I cannot believe I said that. How could I possibly help this man?’”

Sims Smith forgot about the encounter until several years later, when she was recovering from an injury and spending long periods of time in deep meditation. “And in all that quiet, I heard, ‘You’re supposed to try to help Kuten-la,’” she said. “I thought that was kind of preposterous, but I found a way to get a message to him, telling him that I felt like Spirit was calling me to help him.”

She invited him to Arkansas, “not really imagining he would do it.” To her surprise, in 2016, he came with eight other monks and stayed for three days, talking with Sims Smith about the calling they both felt. That’s when he invited her to spend two weeks in Mongolia with him, outlining their vision to Buddhist leaders there.

The Soviet-influenced communist regime that ruled Mongolia from the 1930s until 1990 repressed religion and religious expression, killing at least 17,000 Buddhist monks and destroying most Buddhist temples in the country.

Since the fall of communism, public religious practices have rebounded. Of Mongolia's 3.3 million citizens, 51.7 percent are Buddhist, 3.2 percent are Muslim, 2.5 percent practice shamanism and 1.3 percent are Christian, with 40.6 percent not reporting a religious affiliation.

Sims Smith believes that fostering interfaith solidarity in Mongolia might help protect religious freedom as a whole in the country.

"When you stabilize the local people and allow them to worship in their own way and teach them to be friends with each other, you stabilize the whole democracy," Sims Smith told the *Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette*.

The pandemic put an indefinite pause on Sims Smith's planned fundraising tour, yet, even without a formal fundraising drive in place, Sims Smith said she has already received \$140,000 in donations. She estimates that the total cost will be around \$1 million.

A site has yet to be determined, and Sims Smith said she can't predict when the building might be finished. But she is undeterred by the challenges.

"There's no doubt in my mind that the money will be raised and we'll be in Mongolia before you know it, opening a new meditation center," she said. "It is our prayer and hope that the Dalai Lama will go to Mongolia to bless it." —Episcopal News Service